



San Francisco parks— for paying customers or for all?

Recreation and Park budget proposals unclear on the concept

Urban parks and recreation facilities are essential public functions for a healthy community. We pay taxes to support them because they fill a need that individuals can't.

San Francisco is facing reduced income into its General Fund. The city's Recreation and Park Department depends on an allocation from this fund for about 30% of its operating budget. What does RPD plan to do about a predicted reduction in its allocation?

The department's preliminary conceptual budget for 2010 - 2011 focuses on making the department "financially self-sustainable" through "market-based programs" designed to "capture" "customers", also referred to as "consumers". For the Sierra Club San Francisco Group, this language is worrisome. The city is in a financial bind, but must we switch from the tradition of public parts into treating them as revenue generators? Will the community's attitude towards our public open spaces change? Once a requirement for "financial sustainability" is instituted, will parks ever be free again?

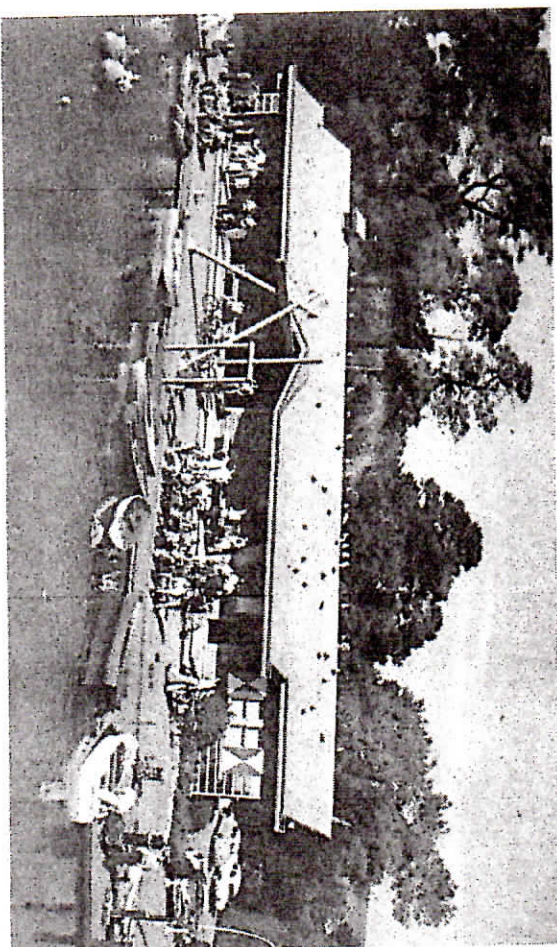
At a series of four public meetings on the budget, audiences had lots of comments and questions. Everyone wanted to explain that they don't go to the park as a 'customer' but as an 'enjoyer'. A woman who runs a yoga class—as a volunteer—was concerned that her free class would have to charge a fee. Her students were in the audience and chimed in as a chorus with their pleas to keep park access free. Everyone seemed to have a story.

At the Strybing Arboretum RPD is again proposing admission fees. Last year more than 5,000 people signed a petition opposing such fees. The Recreation and Park

Commission withdrew the fee proposal, the mayor sent it anyway to the Board of Supervisors, and the Board voted *unanimously* against it (see October-November-December 2010 Yodeler, page 5). Now the department appears to be trying to revive it. It is not clear that revenues from such a fee would even pay for the costs of collecting it, but the biggest argument against it is that it would in essence privatize a central 70-year-old public resource.

Other money-based proposals try to eat away at other parts of Golden Gate Park. The soccer fields out near Ocean Beach are now fenced and locked, off-limits to informal play. The department proposes to convert them soon into brightly lit, synthetic-turf fields (see article, page 12). Hoping that restaurants will bring in more money than boat rentals, RPD has proposed converting the Stow Lake Boathouse into a cafe, relegating the boats to the basement down a steep incline, where they would require a three-person moving team to bring them to the lake. It wouldn't take long for the boats to go away altogether. There is no public demand or desire for an indoor cafe/restaurant at Stow Lake. The frequent users of the boathouse, especially the elderly who use it daily as their "outdoor living room", realize that this change will greatly increase prices and make the boathouse uninviting to seniors.

In this market-based budget, is RPD forgetting the traditional value of recreation and parks for the public of a great city, and using these spaces as mere private, rentable real estate? If RPD needs to be 'financially sustainable', does that mean it should be primarily a landlord?



Snug at Stow Lake's edge is the curious-looking Boathouse. Rectangular and simple in shape it has strong stylistic details reminiscent of a former time. The exterior alternates thick and thin lateral boards, giving an Alpine appearance of squared logs with thick chink gaps between. The windows are covered with heavy sliding wooden shutters painted in a surrounding red and white 'X' pattern, while the doorways are barn-style with large sliding coverings in green. One of the doorways opens to the concession stand, the other to the boat-storage/repair area. Among the quaint details are the large wooden gutters that extend beyond the building with no down spouts, allowing rain water to cascade to the pavement below. The building was designed in 1946 by notable architect Warren Perry, who was dean of the UC Berkeley School of Architecture and also designed the Cal Stadium.

This building has always served as a boathouse, not a restaurant, and we see no good reason to change.

San Francisco needs a **public review** of RPD funding. The whole RPD budget needs to be put on the table, not just the recreation-center workers and gardeners, but also administration. With privatization on the agenda, the review should examine, with cautionary foresight, the history of how such "public/private partnerships" have oftentimes cost a lot of public money in San Francisco.

In fact, why should the General Fund of San Francisco no longer fund our parks, open spaces, and recreation centers? Our taxes go to the General Fund, and the benefits should include free public parks. The General Fund income for 2009 - 2010 is \$2.8 billion dollars. The RPD operating budget is \$126 mil-

lion, with only \$33.4 million coming from the General Fund. It seems shameful that this exceedingly small allocation should be slashed disproportionately. Public parks, open spaces, and recreation centers are essential public facilities. Our taxes support them, and they need to be kept open for all.

WhatYouCanDo

Contact your supervisor (see contact information in Hunters Point article on following page). Ask them not to wait till June to study the Recreation and Park budget. Ask them to hold public hearings on it now.

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